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## The past status of the herons in Britain

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Britain now supports few species of heron compared to neighbouring countries in N. W. Europe. It seems likely that in the Middle Ages, when the climate was warmer (Reid Henry & Harrison 1988: 17) and there were more wetlands and fewer people, there may have been more. About 1595 Thomas Muffett reported that in addition to the Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* they included the Black, White and Criel Heronshaws and Mire-dromble (Mullens 1912). An examination of records of that time (Bourne in press) suggests that these may have been the following species:

**Black Heron.** This was described about 1668 by Sir Thomas Browne (Stevenson & Southwell 1870: 145, Southwell 1902) as "black on both sides the bottom of the neck white gray on the outside spotted all along with black on the inside a black coppe of small feathers some a spanne long, bill poynted and yallowe 3 inches long. Back heron coloured intermixed with long white fethers. The flying fethers black. The brest black and white most black. The legges and feet not green but ordinary dark cork colour". This agrees with the Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* except that the latter is more rufous. Apparently Browne's specimens, subsequently destroyed during an outbreak of the

plague, were in poor condition, and Browne may have attributed the rufous colour to staining

**White Heron.** This was discussed by Stubbs (1910a), who cited some fifteen references to the consumption of up to a thousand birds at feasts between the 15th and 17th centuries. He deduces this must have been the Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, later adding (Stubbs 1910b) that while it may sometimes have been imported, breeding-places were also specifically protected in 1564 (8 Eliz. c. 15). There is a good drawing of a white heron half the size of a Common Crane *Grus grus* in British Library ms. Roy. 19 B.xv, folio 37v., possibly from East Anglia about 1375 (Yapp 1981). Little Egrets have recently started to breed again in both Britain and Ireland (Lock & Cook 1998). Stubbs (1910b) also suggested that, in view of reports of a larger bird with no crest which may have interbred with Grey Herons, either the Great Egret *Egretta alba* and/or an albinistic Grey Heron may also have been present. While in modern times until recently Great Egrets bred no nearer than central Europe, they have now also started to breed in both the Netherlands and France (Marion 1999).

**Criel Heron and Brewe.** According to Furnivall (1868) a Crielle was a dwarf heron. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also gives Cryal or Criell Heron as an old name for egret, used by Samuel Johnson for a heron, though Muffett (Mullens 1912) listed the Heron and White and Criel Heronshaws separately. Possibly it was another species, the Brewe, often listed with the Egret at feasts and by the London Poulterers from the 14th to the 17th centuries; it commanded a similar price to an Egret (Jones 1965). This has previously been identified as a wader (Stubbs 1910a, Gurney 1921) or the Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* (Bourne 1996). While its name was spelt "Brewe" in Lisle Letters from Calais to England in the 1530s, what appears to be the same word is spelt first "bioreaux" and then "bihoreaulx" in local correspondence (Byrne 1981: 1183, 1384), implying that Brewe must be an English phonetic spelling of a French word, possibly for culinary purposes similar to beef, mutton or pork. If so, Christian Jouanin reports it can only be the Héron Bihoreaux or Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*. A bone of this species has also been found in the area where the poulterers kept their wares near London Wall (Harrison 1980, Jones 1965). It is clearly viable in Britain since feral birds of the North American race *N. n. hoactli* have bred at Edinburgh Zoo since 1951 (Lever 1977), and the nominate European race at Great Witchingham in Norfolk since they escaped during the great gale of October 1987 (Williamson 1998).

**Mire Dromble.** This is usually identified as the Great Bittern, but that species is included alongside the Mire Drumble by Muffett (Mullens 1912) and others in a number of lists. It might be the otherwise unrecorded Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, accepted as a lost British species by sceptical Alfred Newton (1893–96), but still found breeding occasionally (Hollaway 1995).

Thus all the herons that now breed in NW Europe may have occurred in Britain until they became a favourite quarry for falconry and delicacies for the table under the disorderly rule of the Plantagenets (Table 1). It may be wondered why Brewes became so popular that they were sent by Lord Lisle to his nephew King Henry VIII, as a display of loyalty after the execution of Queen Anne Boleyn, in May 1536 (Byrne 1981, letters 698–9). While I can find nobody who has tasted a heron, together with some other famous delicacies, such as the Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, Knot *Calidris canutus*, Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, Ortolan *Emberiza hortulana* and Beccafico *Sylvia* sp., they are migrants which may put on much fat. The mean weight of the Night Heron was reported by Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer (1966) to increase by 17% between July and August, which may explain why it became so tasty that it required “no sauce but salt” (Furnivall 1868).

Once order was restored under the Tudors, William Harrison reported (Holinshead 1586):

“Alas, such is my small skill in foules, that to say the truth, I can neither recite their numbers, nor well distinguish one kind of them from another. Yet this I have by generall knowledge, that there is no nation under the sunne, which hath alredie in the time of the yere more plentie of wild foule than we, for so manie kinds as our Island dooth bring foorth, and much more would have, if those of the higher soile might be spared but one yere or two, from the greedie engins of covetous foulers, which set onlie for the pot & purse. Certes this enormitie bred great trouble in K. Johns daies, insomuch that going in progress about the tenth (year) of his reigne (1209), he found little or no game wherwith to solace himself, or exercise his falcons. Wherefore . . . he restrained all maner of hawking or taking of wild-foule throughout England for a season, whereby the land within few yeares was throughlie replenished againe. But what stand I upon this impertinent discourse? Of such therefore as are bred in our land, we have the crane, the bitter, the wild & tame swan, the bustard, the herron . . . beside diverse other, whose names to me are utterlie unknowne . . . As for egrets, pawpers and such like, they are daily brought unto us from beyond the sea, as if all the foule of our countrie could not suffice to satisfie our delicate appetites”.

Waterbird conservation first appears to have been practiced in the Classical Greek city-state of Stymphalus, when it was mocked as a labour of Herculese (Bourne 1982). The activities of King John appear to have received less attention, and while the Tudors also made some attempt at conservation, it also did not last long (Datta 1998). Herons in particular appear to have been the favourite quarry of falconry, and its status at the end of the Tudor period is indicated by William Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (2.ii.373–5): “I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw” though it is also notable that apparently the compositor did not recognise “hernshaw”. This implies, first, that the upper classes then knew a

TABLE 1  
Possible past status of north-west European herons in Britain

Species	Nearest population	Britain	
		Past	Recent
Great Bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Adjacent coasts Denmark to France	Common, lost XIX century	Return 1911 now declining
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	Adjacent coasts low Countries, France	?	Occasional breeding
Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Adjacent coasts Netherlands, France	Middle ages-?	Vagrant, feral
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Spreading north, now coast France	Middle ages-?	Breeding from 1995
Great Egret <i>Egretta alba</i>	Central Europe, now Netherlands, France	?	Vagrant
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Adjacent coasts Norway to France	Common	Common
Purple Heron <i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Netherlands, South France	Possibly to XVII century?	Vagrant



nobleman was expected to be able to tell the two apart, and secondly, that it was already recognised that they arrived with south and not with north winds. The climate was getting colder (Reid Henry & Harrison 1988: 17), the main drainage of the fens was begun under the Stuarts, and by the time that it became possible to identify heron species, some came no more. Now that after a century of nature conservation they are reappearing it should not be forgotten that, like various wildfowl, they may have been here before.

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